VICTORIAN RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM REFLECTED IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY

ROBERT HAMILTON MOORE

A. B., Indiana University, 1934

A. M., Indiana University, 1938

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
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The history of the Late-Victorian religious conflict has been traced before, but always with the impersonal objectivity of the later historian. Yet there is more to any intellectual movement than the interaction of ideas and the maneuvering of shadow figures; there is more to the history of the Late-Victorian religious conflict than has been presented by the Church historian or the historian of rationalism. There is the personal agony of doubt, the groping for intellectual and emotional security, the bitter cross-fire of opposing schools, the despair of uncertainty, the joy of answers found. These the objective historian does not present; they must come from those who themselves felt the impact of new ideas on what had been accepted as impregnable truth. To secure that subjective point of view, to present the religious conflict in terms of individual human beings by drawing on their own accounts of their lives and the intellectual turmoil of their times is the primary purpose of this study.

The secondary purpose, the testing of the source-value of autobiography for the history of ideas, developed from the study itself. As numerous autobiographies were examined, a clear composite picture of the religious conflict emerged, and the conviction grew that the autobiography has been unduly neglected by the historian of intellectual movements, who goes as a rule to other sources for his material. Even the few students of the autobiography as a literary form have been chiefly concerned with its source-value to the biographer. Yet the history of ideas is closely bound up with the lives of those who disseminate them, and the autobiographies of those caught up in an intellectual movement can and do present detailed and documented accounts of the development of thought in their age; the

details recurring in many such autobiographies sketch the development of the movement. It seemed worthwhile, accordingly, to analyze those elements of strength and weakness in the autobiographic form which determine the validity of its evidence for the historian of ideas.

The study is in three parts. First is presented a general sketch of the conflict as historians customarily portray it. Second, in greater detail, is presented an account of the conflict—initial beliefs, the sources of doubt, the final beliefs, and the personal and public effects of the conflict—drawn from autobiographies alone. The similarities of the two pictures clearly indicate the capacity of the autobiography to produce such a picture, besides adding a sense of the human emotion which must acompany intellectual turmoil. Third is presented an analysis of the value of autobiography for the history of ideas.

The years 1859-1860 may be considered the beginning of the conflict resulting from the nineteenth century liberal movement in religion, and, consequently, in order to secure at least one generation which had fully matured during the preparatory years and one which grew up during the years of the resultant conflict, twenty autobiographers born between 1820 and 1860 (all men of letters) were selected for detailed study: Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904), Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895), Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897), Frederic Harrison (1831-1923), William Hale White (1831-1913), Sir Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), Alfred Austin (1835-1913), Samuel Butler (1835-1902), Sir Walter Besant (1836-1901), John, Viscount Morley (1838-1923), Richard Whiteing (1840-1928), Edward Carpenter (1844-1929), Annie Wood Besant (1847-1933), Sir Edmund Gosse (1849-1928), William Hurrell Mallock (1849-1923), Mrs. Humphry Ward (1851-1920), Sir Henry Rider Haggard (1856-1925), Henry Woodd Nevinson (1856-1941), and Lawrence Pearsall Jacks (1860-.....). Among them, they produced twenty-four autobiographies and auto-

biographic novels which are fairly representative of Late-Victorian autobiographic writing.

The historians and the autobiographers present essentially the same picture, the latter in full detail. They agree that religious England in the 1850's—Church and Chapel—was predominantly Evangelical, laying great stress on the personal relationship between God and the individual sinner, on the importance of personal conversion as a sign of Redemption through Christ's Atonement, on the strict observance of a pious life in keeping with the Divine ordinances revealed to man in the inspired and inerrant Bible. Yet (they agree) the early fervor of Evangelicalism had waned, and for most, conviction had hardened into formula. Basic in this religion was literal belief in the inspired truth of Biblical revelation—all doctrine, whether Calvinist or Arminian, was justified by reference to the authority of the Word of God.

In 1859, science, through Darwin's *Origin of Species*, called the Pentateuchal account of Creation, of the Fall, and consequently of the necessity for Atonement, into question. In 1860, the researches of the Higher Criticism, through *Essays and Reviews*, began to introduce the educated Englishman to doubts not only of the inspired truth of the Pentateuch but of the rest of the Old Testament and even of the New Testament. The scientists, the Higher Critics, the philosophers, the early leaders of the Broad Church movement, the authors, the personal meditations of the common man: Lyell, Darwin, Huxley; Strauss, Renan, Bishop Colenso; J. S. Mill, Comte, Spencer; F. D. Maurice, Kingsley, Benjamin Jowett, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley; Carlyle, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold; the ethical values of countless major and minor figures—all of these in one way and another whittled away the hardened dogmas of the faith which had seemed incontestably secure in the 1850's.

The response of orthodoxy was, of course, immediate and violent. Polemic and persecution; charges of heresy, of

infidelity, of treachery to God and the Church; vituperation, ridicule, denunciation; blast and counter-blast flew with slowly diminishing fury for thirty years. During the conflict many withdrew completely from all contact with the churches and flaunted an arrogant atheism. Many others abandoned the traditional communions as hopelessly out-moded and established new religions—Neo-Unitarian Theism, Positivism, Theosophy in many guises. Many others, some permanently, some temporarily, remained within the existing churches and worked to broaden the official interpretations of the traditional dogmas so that almost all who could "faintly trust the larger hope" might remain within the fold.

By 1889, the conflict was over. In that year, *Lux Mundi*, under the editorship of the High Churchman Charles Gore, virtually repeated the liberal ideas which in *Essays and Reviews* had touched off the controversy. But the liberal leaven had done its work. *Essays and Reviews* had raised a tempest; *Lux Mundi* scarcely raised an eyebrow.

The effects on the churches, especially on the Church of England, are somewhat surprising. The strict Low Church orthodoxy of 1850 virtually disappeared. The permissible latitude in doctrine became so great as to leave interpretation practically to the individual conscience of each priest and each parishoner. Church practice superseded Church doctrine in the forefront of attention. And since many of the most liberal left the Church altogether or developed a bland indifference to doctrine and practice alike, the chief ecclesiastical heirs of the conflict were the Ritualists, who almost alone retained sufficiently fervent convictions to impose their will on their congregations. Of the three Church parties—the Low Church, the Broad Church, and the High Church—the first lost its hold on both doctrine and practice, the second largely won control of doctrine, and the third took over Church practice by default.

So far, the historians and the autobiographers are in

general agreement. In considering other public effects of the conflict, however, the evidence from the autobiographies adds one important, supplemental point which the historians have not generally noticed. From the nearly unanimous testimony of the autobiographers, the inescapable conviction arises that the religious liberalism of the second half of the century is not merely one aspect of the general liberalism which is a striking characteristic of the period, but instead may in large part have been basic and causative.

The historians, in so far as they indicate underlying causes for the efflorescence of social and humanitarian activity in the 1870's and after, are inclined to attribute it to the continuation of the Evangelical humanitarianism which in the 1830's had led to the abolition of slavery, to the Factory Acts, and to electoral reform. Yet the 40's and 50's show unmistakable signs of a growing lethargy and an increasing stress on the desirability of the poor's being content with the condition of life to which God had called them. It was *laissez faire*, the machinations of Louis Napoleon, and material prosperity which engrossed England and its Parliament in the middle years of the century. In the 1870's and after, however, as the liberalization of religion stirred men's thoughts, liberal activity of all sorts—social, economic, and political—became suddenly renascent. Social settlements were founded in growing numbers, trades unions were revived and ultimately strengthened, education was provided for the masses and reformed for their masters, the legal and economic position of women was increasingly improved, the base of the electorate was broadened and broadened again, and more and more Englishmen developed social and socialistic consciences.

In all of this many of the autobiographers played active parts, and frequently they attribute their humanitarian interests and activity directly to their abandonment of the restrictive orthodoxy of 1850. They decided, for example, that if evil does not necessarily exist in the world with God's

permission, and hence in a sense with His protection, it might be possible to eliminate evil by eliminating its sources in over-crowding, in ignorance, and in other circumstances resulting from human maladroitness. They decided that if the main purpose of terrestrial existence is not necessarily preparation for eternity—if immortality may after all be a delusion—man's only hope of progress and perfectibility may lie in his own attempts to better his lot on earth and with it the lot of the race. They decided that if the station in which a man finds himself is not necessarily the one to which God has called him, human effort might well be directed toward improving the lot of all men and particularly of those whose lot offers most room for improvement. As a result, they threw themselves vigorously into all the liberal movements of the age, and prided themselves on so clearly showing the way that by the end of the century all the churches, even the most conservative, had come to lay a new and heavy emphasis on social work and on alleviating the miseries of the underprivileged. They agree that religious liberalism, in other words, is not merely one aspect of general liberalism, but an important cause of general liberalism.

This suggestion supplements the picture presented by the historians, and it arises directly from the nature of autobiography. Both the essential similarity of the two views of the conflict and this supplemental difference, therefore, suggest that the historian of intellectual movements might profitably make more use than he now does of autobiographic evidence. He must, of course, employ a large enough group of representative autobiographies to secure a wide range of details, but from them he can secure a composite picture true to the age and the movement he is tracing.

The presentation of a detailed picture of the intellectual movement thus briefly sketched is the major part of this dissertation. But it is still only a part. There remain to be considered those elements of strength and weakness in

the autobiographic form—particularly, of course, in the Victorian autobiography—which determine its evidential value and indicate the kind of evidence the historian of ideas may expect to find in autobiographic writing.

We are, to begin with, concerned exclusively with the serious autobiography—what Anna Robeson Burr calls the "subjective autobiography." (With the gossip of the anecdotal memoir, whatever may be its value to the social historian, the historian of ideas has little to do.) The subjective autobiography is a form most freely produced during periods of intellectual change. It is written by those who feel that their lives in such periods are representative and significant, and who are impelled by a sincere desire to present the truth of those lives and of their times as they see it. Most students of autobiography agree on the essential sincerity of the autobiographic impulse and the overall truth of the resultant picture of the times. The subjective autobiography appears in one of two general forms: it may be avowed autobiography, or it may be ostensibly fiction, the autobiographic novel. The two forms are complementary, the strengths of one tending to correct the weaknesses of the other, and the historian of intellectual movements will do well to include in his study representative examples of each.

The autobiography is first and foremost a biography, and many of the weaknesses are biographical weaknesses. For the historian of ideas who includes numerous autobiographies, of both major and minor figures, the composite picture of the movement under study which emerges from the recurring details is to a large extent a self-correcting picture. Its outlines may be slightly blurred, but the likeness to the age is unmistakable. Nevertheless, since objection is sometimes made to the use of autobiographic evidence on the grounds of these largely irrelevant weaknesses, not merely the strengths of the form but these weaknesses must be considered.

First, the strengths of the avowed autobiography.

The history of ideas is closely bound up with the lives of those who have molded those ideas, and the autobiography is the history of a life by the one man most conversant with the events of that life, the one man most likely to know the influences affecting his thinking, the one man best equipped to follow the development of his thought. Much which is irrecoverable to an objective biographer is readily available to the self-biographer. Further, all the sources to which the objective biographer may go—letters, journals, the recollections of friends, other writing—are also available to the autobiographer, and the Victorian autobiographer, at least, makes constant use of them, verifying his memory, documenting his account, and making as certain as possible that the truth as he sees it approximates objective truth.

A second characteristic of the subjective autobiography which makes it a valuable source for the historian of ideas lies in the purpose of the autobiographer and the nature of the material he commonly presents. He is primarily concerned with expressing, explaining, and forwarding the ideas that have governed his life and have seemed important to him and to his age. Consequently, a study of numerous autobiographies leads to the ideas that have seemed important to those living through the period. Moreover, those ideas are presented in their maturity, in perspective, with full attention to their sources and their development, so that the autobiographies lead the student to the causes and the growth of ideas where a study of the customary sources leads him merely to fuller statements of isolated stages of thought. Both sorts of evidence are important, but it is the autobiography which provides the clues the student needs to understand and evaluate the evidence from the other sources.

A final strength of the autobiographic form lies in the fact that it presents not merely the autobiographer, but his friends, his adversaries, and his age. The picture resulting

from study of the form, consequently, is a broad and again a self-correcting one.

The weaknesses of the form, as remarked above, are of less concern to the historian of ideas than they are to the biographer. Further, most of them disappear as numerous autobiographies are examined and the pattern of recurring details emerges.

The autobiographer cannot present an objective picture of himself. Yet, being both well informed and generally sincere in his desire to present the truth, it may be doubted that he is any more liable to misinterpretation than an "objective" outsider who attempts to reconstruct his life. Moreover, any sort of testimony must be used with discrimination, and the student of autobiography will soon be aware of unconscious and unintentional revelation of character which sometimes enables him to see more than the autobiographer himself knew was there.

Second, the presentation of events and motives depends on the highly fallible human memory. Yet the autobiographer is customarily aware of this fallibility and corrects his own recollections by reference to and often by reproduction of contemporary letters or other documents.

Four lesser weaknesses are to a great extent corrected as the composite picture takes shape. (1) The autobiographer lays stress on the climactic points in his life and thought, somewhat obscuring the normal routine of his life and the slow growth of his thinking. (2) He tends to be reticent not only about his weaknesses, but also about his triumphs, through an undue sense of modesty that blurs the clarity of his picture. (3) He tends to be reticent about others who played contingent parts in the drama he is producing (though posthumous publication is often employed to obviate the necessity for either kind of reticence). Finally, (4) the autobiographer is often not primarily concerned with the particular idea the historian is tracing, and the relevant

material must—as with any sort of evidence—be sifted from the irrelevant. Yet, again, the pattern of details recurring in numerous autobiographies simplifies even the process of sifting.

There remains one major weakness in the avowed autobiography which compels the historian to supplement autobiographic evidence by reference to the autobiographers' other writing: The autobiography customarily provides a summary of the stages of the author's thought, thereby providing the clues to the pattern of development through which that thought has passed, but it rarely or never provides a full statement of either the early or the final form of the author's ideas. For that, the autobiographer's other writing must be consulted.

The second general form the subjective autobiography may take, the autobiographic novel, is in many ways complementary to the avowed autobiography, the strengths of one correcting the weaknesses of the other. The autobiographic novel itself is of three types: autobiography in fictional guise, fictional autobiography, and autobiographic fiction. The first, autobiography in fictional guise, is autobiography in everything but name. It remains true to the facts of the author's life and adopts the fictional form merely to secure freedom to select and focus, as does Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son.* Fictional autobiography is autobiographic in intention but makes greater use of fictitious detail, adding or subtracting detail freely to secure an emphatic re-creation of the significance of the movement the author is portraying. Of this type are William Hale White's Mark Rutherford books or Samuel Butler's *Way of All Flesh.* Autobiographic fiction is frankly fictional in detail; yet it too remains autobiographic in intention, portraying the emotional or intellectual development of the author through fictitious characters and events. An excellent example of this type—providing a good picture, incidentally, of the Late-Victorian religious conflict—is Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere.*

Novels of all three types provide the subjective autobiographer with certain advantages which are the strengths of the novel form.

The principal advantage of the autobiographic novel, both to the writer and to the historian of ideas, has already been suggested. In it the author may focus attention on those elements of the life-pattern which seem to him pertinent to the purpose impelling him to write; and so far as the author's integrity and judgment may be trusted (a limitation common to all forms of testimony) the novel may present an integrated picture divested of irrelevant detail.

Equally important, by freeing himself from the avowed presentation of his own life, the author may not merely subtract irrelevant detail, but may also add events and influences typical of the movement he is portraying, whether he personally experienced them or not. He can, in short, himself present a composite picture true to the significant features of the movement.

He may, further, address a wider audience than the avowed autobiography might appeal to—which is important to the historian of ideas inasmuch as it provides him with autobiographic evidence that might otherwise have been denied him by the unwillingness of the author to use the avowed autobiography as his medium. And finally, the autobiographic novelist can work without restriction by the reticence which sometimes prevents the author of an avowed autobiography from telling the whole truth as he sees it.

Because of these advantages of the autobiographic novel, the student of the development of ideas and the resultant movements will do well to supplement his use of the autobiography proper by reference also to representative autobiographic novels; preferably, to secure varied emphases and approaches, he should use all three of the forms in which the autobiographic novel occurs.

There are, however, weaknesses inherent in the form

which make it necessary for the student to test its evidence against evidence from other sources. Three are readily apparent: The truly autobiographic novel is relatively rare; the autobiographic elements of the novels are sometimes difficult to distinguish from the fictitious; and freedom to select, arrange, and focus carries with it greater freedom to distort and greater magnification of errors in judgment.

A fourth weakness is more serious. The novel tends to stress the individuality of its characters, and hence stresses the importance of the individual rather than the group development of the movement under consideration. What is intended as an epitomizing of the general movement tends to become in its effect an obscuring of the general nature of that movement. This weakness can be avoided by the novelist; Mrs. Ward avoids it in *Robert Elsmere.* But it occurs in the autobiographic novel more often than not.

Here, as elsewhere, the autobiography proper and the autobiographic novel are complementary, and though other sources of evidence are not to be ignored, the study of numerous avowed autobiographies will in itself serve to place in perspective the focused picture drawn by the novel. And even more important to the historian of ideas, the stress in the avowed autobiography on the sources and the development of the author's ideas—which would clog the action of the novel and so is customarily omitted—provides not merely the composite picture of the intellectual movement under investigation, but the analysis and commentary by means of which that picture can be understood.

Cumulatively, therefore, a study of the subjective autobiographies of an age, particularly if they are so selected as to include representative autobiographic novels, can provide for the historian of ideas a true picture of the development of ideas and of the resultant intellectual movements within that age.

VITA

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